

*It is the function of psychotherapy to 'remain an obstinate attempt of two people to recover the wholeness of being human through the relationship between them.'*

## Humanism and Psychotherapy\*

THIS essay is based upon the recent widely discussed book, *The Politics of Experience*.<sup>1</sup> Dr. Ronald Laing, the author of this work, is a British psychiatrist associated with Tavistock Clinic. His work gives us not only rich and interesting insights into psychotherapy; it also gives us a chance to consider certain kinds of humanism and their relation to religion and therapy.

In arguing at one point in this book that psychotherapy does not need to become a pseudo-esoteric cult, Ronald Laing writes:

We must continue to struggle through our confusion, to insist on being human. . . . Existence is a flame which constantly melts and recasts our theories. . . . We hope to share the experience of a relationship, but

<sup>1</sup> Pantheon Books, New York, 1967, \$4.95. Dr. Laing's other books include: *The Divided Self*; *Sanity, Madness and the Family* (with A. Esterson); *Reason and Violence—A Decade of Sartre's Philosophy* (with D. Cooper), and *Interpersonal Perception—A Theory and Method of Research* (with H. Phillipson and Russel A. Lee).

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ROLLO MAY

*Psychoanalyst  
New York, New York*

the only beginning, or even end, may be to share the experience of its absence.

That the whole field of psychotherapy has been and is now in confusion no one can doubt. In various parts of the country, the lecturer is asked from the audience, "Is psychoanalysis dead?" "Is Freud dead?" Generally the question arises from the same faddist, dogmatizing kind of thinking that led everyone ten years ago to make out of Freud a god who could do no wrong, and out of their particular brand of psychotherapy a catechism which was guaranteed to save us from our human agony and struggle. In the meantime, different kinds of therapy continue to spring up. And the studies of the results of therapy seem so often to be made on the basis of the same kind of externalistic question of how the individual "adjusts" to our alienated society that their "proofs" that therapy does or does not do any good seem curiously irrelevant.

In this confusion everyone seems to forget the real issue—that human beings do change, for good or ill. They are born, live, work, suffer travail, some-

times achieve some love and meaning, and die. Order could come out of the confusion if we kept our minds on the question: What does it mean to be human? The directness and single-minded honesty with which it asks this question is what makes this book of Laing's so refreshing and compelling.

Ronald Laing represents a creative synthesis of a number of significant streams in the psychotherapeutic field. By training a psychiatrist and associate member of the British Psychoanalytic Society, he is Principal Investigator of the Schizophrenia and Family Research Unit at the Tavistock Institute of Human Relations in London. By choice is he closely associated with American anthropologists like Gregory Bateson and Jules Henry. He is concerned with contemporary sociology and has played a central role in some of the significant recent research on family therapy, reported in a previous book, *The Families of Schizophrenics*. He is thoroughly grounded in modern existential and phenomenological thought, and knows the critical importance for the therapist of clarifying his own philosophical assumptions. And not of least importance, he is of that rare but important breed in which the scientist and artist dwell in the same skin: the last fifteen pages of this book consist of a long poem by him entitled "The Bird of Paradise."

"A revolution is currently going on in relation to sanity and madness," Laing writes as a kind of theme of this book, "both inside and outside psychiatry. The clinical point of view is giving way before a point of view that is both existential and social." He believes we are in the midst of a shift no less radical than the shift from the demonological to the clinical viewpoint three centuries ago. When, with Bleuler and the medical model, mental disturbances were classified as illnesses, a concerted

endeavor was made to find in schizophrenic behavior certain symptoms and signs of a disease of unknown origin, assumedly largely genetic-constitutionally determined. What actually happened, by and large, as Szasz and others have pointed out, was that the patient was adjudged "psychotic" if he could not adjust to society's requirements.

We are now in the third stage, Laing believes, in which it is seen that schizophrenia is a *strategy*, a necessary way the person must pick to survive in an alienated world:

In over 100 cases where we studied the actual circumstances around the social event when one person comes to be regarded as schizophrenic, it seems to us that *without exception* the experience and behavior that gets labeled schizophrenic is a *special strategy that a person invents in order to live in an unlivable situation*.

Psychiatrists and psychologists who hold to the belief that schizophrenia is a species of pathology of course show much resistance to Laing's viewpoint. But Laing cites the research of Bateson—based on the important double-bind theory—and the new studies of the families of schizophrenics at Yale, at Palo Alto, at the National Institute of Mental Health, and his own research. "In all these places, to the best of my knowledge, *no* schizophrenic has been studied whose disturbed pattern of communication has not been shown to be a reflection of, and reaction to, the disturbed and disturbing pattern characterizing his or her family of origin."

What is refreshing and exciting in Laing is not his glorification of the irrational—of which he is sometimes accused by psychiatrists and psychologists who hold to the belief in adaptation—but his frank challenge, "Adaption to what? To society? To a mad world?" To Laing what seems the height of irrationality is what is called "normal" in

our world—adjusting to a world of Vietnam, to a world in which cities not only poison their citizens physically through air pollution but shrink the individual's consciousness at the same time, a world in which "machines are already becoming better at communicating with each other than human beings with human beings. The situation is ironical. More and more concern about communication, less and less to communicate."

His constructive contribution is most accurately to be described as a development and confluence of the interpersonal theory of Harry Stack Sullivan with an ontological, phenomenological foundation. To Laing these two go together: he believes that the only way we can understand and deal with human beings is to clarify the "nature of being human"—which is ontology. "Any theory not founded on the nature of being human is a lie and a betrayal of man." And such a theory not based on man's nature will have, to the extent the therapist is consistent, inhuman consequences. He believes that a fundamental source of our confusion in psychology and psychiatry is the "failure to realize that there is an ontological discontinuity between human beings and it-beings." He is here in accord with Buber's idea that psychoanalysis always tends to transform the "I" into an "it."

Though Laing appreciates Freud more deeply than many who make a dogma out of the master's teachings, he holds that we must frankly face the fact that Freud thought and wrote in an alienated age and to some extent is an expression of this alienation. "The metapsychology of Freud, Federn, Rapaport, Hartman, Kris, has no constructs for any social system generated by more than one person at a time. . . . This theory has no category of 'you' . . . no concept of 'me' except as objectified as 'the ego.'" But it is precisely the func-

tion of psychotherapy to "remain an obstinate attempt of two people to recover the wholeness of being human through the relationship between them." We need a form of science in psychology which does not take behavior in contrast to experience, or experience in contrast to behavior, but centers on *the relation between experience and behavior*.

Laing is aware of the widespread emphasis in our day, particularly in America, on studying the individual only in terms of his behavior. But to the extent that we do that, we lose the person. Always the human being is characterized by being both inner experience and outer behavior, and the critical point is the relation between the two. "Natural science knows nothing of the relation between behavior and experience." To him, this requires a new method, which he calls social phenomenology. "We are a generation of men so estranged from the inner world that many are arguing that it does not exist; and that even if it does exist, it does not matter. . . . Quantify the heart's agony and ecstasy in a world in which when the inner world is first discovered, we are liable to find ourselves bereft and derelict. For without the inner the outer loses its meaning, and without the outer the inner loses its substance."

Laing's own sincerity and dedication give his words a compelling power. But with his convictions it is clear he would find himself ranged on a number of battle lines. His chief battle is with the organicists. Laing believes the severe *social* disturbance the schizophrenic is enduring can be seen as the source of the biochemical changes in his body. But he sees no conclusive evidence that the long-pursued aim in our society to try to find organic bases of such "difficulties in living," as Sullivan called

them, has become any more than a possible hypothesis.

He is also ranged against the behavior therapists. "Behavior therapy," he writes, "is the most extreme example of schizoid theory and practice that proposes to think and act purely in terms of the other without reference to the self of the therapist or the patient. . . . It is inevitably therefore a technique of nonmeeting, or manipulation and control."

## II

We shall now compare Laing's humanism to that of Erich Fromm, as shown particularly in one of Fromm's latest books, *The Heart of Man*.<sup>2</sup> Fromm's humanism is much more optimistic than Laing's, but it purchases its confidence—particularly in Fromm's later books—at the price of denying or blocking off significant aspects of man's predicament such as death, grief, and tragedy.

Laing, speaking of the fact that "love" in our society is often a cover for violence, states, "We have to begin by admitting and even accepting our violence, rather than blindly destroying ourselves with it, and therewith we have to realize that we are as deeply afraid to live and to love as we are to die."

Here Fromm, taking the opposite approach, separates people into two categories: those who love life—this type he calls the "biophilous"—and those who love death, the "necrophilous." These latter, of which Hitler is a "pure example," are characterized by their preoccupation with faeces, decay, and destruction. "Man's aim in life," Fromm states, "is to be attracted by all that is alive and separate himself from all that is dead and mechanical."<sup>3</sup> Man should

look at, concern himself with and "love" all things related to life, and should think of nothing less than death.

Many of Fromm's statements, whether they are entirely adequate or not, no one would quarrel with, such as "Good is all that serves life," and "Evil is all that serves death."<sup>4</sup> But they are *formed into a system which makes death itself the evil to be avoided*. And, since we cannot actually avoid the fact that we shall die, the implication is that we not look at it, and in effect evade a large segment of the reality of our human experience.

This dichotomy gets Fromm into curious contradictions. In setting necrophilia and biophilia up as the diametric extremes, Fromm seems to equate the former with psychosis. "The pure necrophile is insane,"<sup>5</sup> he says; and again, "necrophilia is insanity." Several things need to be said about this. First, a concept from psychopathology (the term necrophilia is in origin the term for the morbid symptom of desiring to have intercourse with someone's dead body) cannot be carried over as a norm for human beings in general. This was Paul Tillich's criticism of this paper of Fromm's.

But an even more serious point arises. Does Fromm not cruelly mistake the nature of mental illness? The insane are surely not those who "love death"! They are, rather, those who have experienced such unfortunate circumstances (outward and inward) at an age or condition in which they could not adequately react, that they have had radically to shrink their lives to avoid entire destruction; their hard struggle is to avoid death and still preserve a little life.

Another contradiction lies in Fromm's relating his necrophilia to the

<sup>2</sup> Harper & Row, New York, 1964.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 48.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 47.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 48.

“anal character” in classical psychoanalysis. He states that one way children get started “loving death” is that their parents put too much emphasis on faeces, and the child thus learns to be too concerned with faeces, decay, and dead things. But actually, is not the source of the anal character just the opposite, namely, the pattern in which Victorian parents *repress* concern with faeces, are too squeamish to see and deal with excrement, afraid to affirm the child’s pleasure in his faeces, and institute rigid training so that toilet concerns can be suppressed out of awareness? It is a truism these days that some pleasure and satisfaction in his faeces is a normal and healthy thing for the child, and is one source of later creativity.

Another strange result of Fromm’s separating the “sheep” from the “goats” is seen in his naming Carl Jung as an “outstanding example” of the “necrophilous character.” He cites Jung’s interest in the corpse of a French soldier who had apparently been killed a century and a half earlier, which was unearthed during the excavation of his house, and Jung’s general interest in death as shown in his dreams and conversation. But the curious fact is that, among the early group of leaders in the psychoanalytic field — Freud, Adler, Jung, Rank, *et al.*—Jung was the one who *did* love life, was robust and lived with a good deal of zest, sexually and otherwise. Whether we advocate this and whether we agree with Jung’s theories are, of course, entirely different questions. But the simple fact seems to be that Jung, in sharp contrast to most others in the psychoanalytic field, lived a “happy life.”<sup>6</sup>

After a long and vivid page quoting

things purporting to show that Jung was necrophiliac, Fromm adds that Jung was “an unusually creative person,” and “creation is the opposite to necrophilia.” The explanation, Fromm says, is that Jung solved his conflict by balancing his destructive forces against his constructive ones. But far from this being an *incidental* point, as Fromm makes it, the basic point all along is that creativity and other positive goals of life come not out of “biophilia” as the opposite to “necrophilia,” but *exactly out of the dialectic relation between the two*. As Tillich and Goldstein would put it, creativity comes from the struggle of being against non-being. Creativity is born not in the evading but the *confronting* of death.

What we miss entirely in Fromm is the sense of the tragic. And the chief problem is that such a dichotomy as Fromm makes leads inescapably, quite apart from any intention of the author’s, to playing ostrich with evil and tragedy.<sup>7</sup> Fromm says that when some people see their own necrophiliac elements, they are “shocked by how close they were to the valley of the shadow of death,”<sup>8</sup> and this may make them hurry over to the side of life. At another point he speaks of the “valley of the shadow of death” as something to be avoided like the plague.<sup>9</sup> The psalmist, however, took a very different view. He faced death directly as part of the human situation, “*Though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for thou art with me.*”

<sup>7</sup> Was not the optimistic, romantic liberalism in America one of the chief reasons Americans did not take Hitler seriously at first? Americans had so much suppressed their awareness of the degree of possible human evil that they could not believe he was as bad as reported.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 48.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 59.

<sup>6</sup> Gerald Sykes, *The Hidden Remnant* (New York: Harper & Row, 1962).

This brings us to another methodological confusion in Fromm's chapter on death, and that is the confusing of religious and psychological categories. "The pure necrophile is insane; the pure biophile is saintly."<sup>10</sup> Fromm thus holds that the necrophile and the biophile are diametric opposites. But obviously "insane" and "saintly" are not opposites, but are on different levels. Many saintly persons, like creative geniuses, would be closer technically to the "insane" if you must use psycho-diagnostic categories; their genius, whether in art or religion, is not purchased cheaply. By the same token, Fromm cites Albert Schweitzer as one of the "great representatives of the love of life."<sup>11</sup> But Schweitzer speaks not of "love of life" but of "reverence for life," which in him comes out of a very specific religious tradition and source. Surely this means something very different from "biophilia."<sup>12</sup>

One other curious but consistent result of this dichotomy is that we come in Fromm to the emphasis on sadness as bad. "Sadness is sinful," says Fromm at one point,<sup>13</sup> and again, "sadness is sin."<sup>14</sup> But is not sadness a very healthy and necessary emotion when someone or something we love dies, or when there is a tragic conflict? Grief and mourning have similarly a necessary and useful function. Many of us are profoundly sad

about social and political injustice and cruelty in our world, and I am sure Dr. Fromm is also; and this sadness normally can and should be motivation for positive action against the evils in the situation.

Fromm finally in this book discusses modern man's infatuation with "mechanisms" and the nuclear war preparations, topics on which he used to be cogent and persuasive. But again, his new dichotomy leads him seriously astray. He questions why people accept the vast preparations for nuclear war so docilely and with so little protest, and gives the answer, because they "love death." I propose the exact opposite, namely, that their apathy is related to the *repression* of the reality of death. We don't look at death, we believe somehow a holocaust "can't happen here," and so go on trusting that since civilization survived gunpowder and the bow and arrow, it will survive the nuclear bomb.

What is wholly omitted by Fromm is the fact that those who truly are devoted to life are able to be so by virtue of confronting death. The loving of life *for its own sake* is a dehumanization of the human being. Fromm notes with commendation that "man will do almost anything to preserve his life."<sup>15</sup> True; and this has been universally recognized as the most craven aspect of man. The human being is distinguished in the evolutionary line by virtue of the fact that he has the potentiality for just the opposite: he can hold some values more important to him than life itself. "Give me liberty or give me death," is not mere histrionics or to be dismissed as neurotic. It can be an authentic expression of the human being acting at his noblest and most fully human level. If the mere fact of perpetuating life is the ultimate goal, we have lost the dis-

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 48.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 48.

<sup>12</sup> Fromm quotes as support for his thesis Spinoza's statement, "Everything in so far as it is itself, endeavors to persist in its own being." The term "being" should not be identified, as Fromm does, with biological *life*. To persist in what one conceives of as his being may require, as it did with Jesus and Socrates, giving up one's life.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 47.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 48.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 45.

tinguishing qualities of being human. All through history, except possibly since the great triumph of our industrial age, men have known that unless they were willing to die for something, their lives would be empty. The Greeks said in a hundred different ways that unless one has the courage to give up his life for some value, life itself will have no meaning. "Not life is to be valued," said Aristotle, "but the *good* life."

### III

We return to conclude our discussion of Laing by considering the main criticism of his work, namely that he glorifies schizophrenia. I am much more interested, however, in the fact that he humanizes schizophrenia. In this respect his words have in them the ring of Blake and Dostoevski in literature, and of Sullivan in psychiatry.

But there does remain a real problem in Laing's work. If he rejects, with respect to psychic problems, the concept of "illness," what criteria, what norms does he have as alternatives? What structure does he propose that he, and the rest of us, can build upon? His work may well be misunderstood and misused as a justification for mere "feeling" or anti-intellectualism. Or it may be taken as indicating that if the truth is not readily at hand by our rational methods, LSD and the other drugs will open the magic doors to it. (Granted the hysterical preoccupation—both pro and con—with LSD in this country, the publishers do neither the public nor the book a service in promoting it, as they do on the jacket and in ads, as "giving the kind of emotions often linked to taking of drugs.")

Laing himself is no anti-intellectual;

### Our Editor is Back on the Job

A number of our readers, hearing that our editor, Simon Doniger, was ill in the late autumn and early winter, have asked me about his condition. On my own responsibility as Pastoral Consultant, I have asked his permission to include this brief statement.

In early January, Simon Doniger had surgery at the Methodist Hospital in Houston, a part of the Texas Medical Center. The surgery was serious, involving the main artery of the body. It was successful, and he was able to return home in less than three weeks. Although there was a good deal of pain for some time, there has been no impediment to the healing process.

Because of his penchant for careful planning, Simon Doniger was able to block out all work on our journal so that his absence did not impede our publication. The details which could not be worked out ahead of time were capably picked up by our Assistant Editor, Mrs. Helen MacMaster.

—SEWARD HILTNER

he thinks with dedication and profundity. But the tension in consciousness of holding together—the task Laing essays—such different streams of thought and science is great indeed. And consequently the tendency to slide into anarchy or off into disintegrating tangents is also strong. He has a framework in his ontological bases, and has taken some important steps toward a science of interpersonal relationship. We can hope he will be able to continue building on both, for he has much to give.

This book will excite many readers, enthrall others, and disturb and anger some. But no one who reads it will remain unaffected.

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SCIENCE without religion is lame, religion without science is blind.—ALBERT EINSTEIN